

Message Text

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TAGS: PINT, UR

SUBJECT: SHARP DEALING IN THE ART MARKET

REF: MOSCOW 0050

1. BEGIN SUMMARY. THE SOVIET CULTURE MINISTRY HAS BEEN PLAYING A DEVIOUS GAME WITH A GROUP OF FIVE LEADING MUSCOVITE UNOFFICIAL ARTISTS WHO HAD SUBMITTED TO IT THEIR BEST RECENT WORKS ON THE STRENGTH OF A PROMISE TO BUY. THE PURCHASE HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY POSTPONED, AND THE ARTISTS SUSPECT A CONNECTION WITH A SOVIET ART SALE IN A WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT STORE. THE ARTISTS ARE NOW OSTENTATIOUSLY ORGANIZING AN EXHIBITION OF THE WORKS, IF THEY CAN RECLAIM THEM FROM THE MINISTRY, OR OF THE RECEIPTS THE MINISTRY ISSUED FOR THEM. THE MINISTRY, KNOWING THESE PLANS, CONTINUES TEMPORIZING. MEANWHILE, THE ARTISTS ARE IN SORE FINANCIAL STRAITS SINCE THEY HAVE SOLD LITTLE DURING THE LAST THREE MONTHS.

2. WE SEE AT LEAST TWO POSSIBLE MOTIVES FOR THE MINISTRY'S DECISIONS. FIRST, SOME OFFICIALS MAY WANT TO SAVE SOME GOOD DOMESTIC ART FOR THE FUTURE. SECOND, THE WORKS IN QUESTION MIGHT INDEED BE OFFERED AT SOME POINT TO AMERICAN COMMERCIAL INTERESTS. IN THESE DAYS OF SOVIET BOP PROBLEMS, ALL INCOMING DOLLARS LOOK GOOD. END SUMMARY.

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3. THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE USSR (MIN CULT) IS PLAYING A DEVIOUS

GAME WITH FIVE IMPORTANT UNOFFICIAL MOSCOW ARTISTS. THE ARTISTS INVOLVED ARE PLAVINSKIY (OUR SOURCE), KALININ, NEMUKHIN, KRASNOPEVTSEV, AND KANDAUROV.

4. SHORTLY AFTER THE SEPTEMBER EXHIBITION OF UNOFFICIAL ARTISTS IN MOSCOW AT THE EXHIBITION OF ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS (MOSCOW A-380), THE ABOVE ARTISTS (WHO HAD NOT PARTICIPATED) WERE APPROACHED BY A MIN CULT REPRESENTATIVE WHO SAID THAT THEIR WORKS WERE DESIRED FOR A JOINT EXHIBITION WITH THOSE OF OFFICIAL ARTISTS TO SHOW "THE QUALITY OF ART THAT WE HAVE." IT WAS STRONGLY IMPLIED, BUT NOT DIRECTLY STATED, THAT THE WORKS WERE TO HAND IN THE TRET'YAKOV GALLERY.

5. THE ARTISTS WERE TOLD NOT TO EXPECT HIGH PRICES BUT SUBMITTED THEIR BEST CURRENT WORKS HOPING THAT THEY WOULD BECOME PART OF THE GOVERNMENTAL COLLECTIONS. IN RETROSPECT, THEY REMEMBER BEING TOLD THAT IT WAS NOT NECESSARY THAT THEY SUBMIT THEIR BEST WORK. TWO DAYS BEFORE THE ARTISTS HANDED OVER THEIR WORK TO THE MINISTRY, THEY REPORTEDLY HEARD A VOA BROADCAST ABOUT AMERICAN PURCHASES OF UNOFFICIAL AND OFFICIAL ART FOR SALE IN U.S. DEPARTMENT STORES (REFTEL). DESPITE SUSPICIONS THAT THEIR WORKS WERE IN SOME WAY CONNECTED WITH THIS SALE, THE ARTISTS SUBMITTED THEIR PAINTINGS AND GRAPHICS TO THE MINISTRY REPRESENTATIVE WHO TOLD THEM THAT THE PURCHASE WOULD BE CONCLUDED QUICKLY. THE PURCHASE HAS BEEN REPEATEDLY POSTPONED, HOWEVER, EACH TIME WITH THE PROMISE THAT IT WOULD BE CONSUMMATED WITHIN TWO WEEKS TIME.

6. IN EARLY DECEMBER THE FIVE ARTISTS CONCEIVED THE IDEA OF WITHDRAWING THEIR WORKS AND EXHIBITING THEM UNOFFICIALLY AS "WORKS RECLAIMED FROM THE MINISTRY." THE RECEIPTS GIVEN BY MIN CULT FOR THEM WERE ALSO TO BE DISPLAYED. THE ARTISTS BEGAN OSTENTATIOUSLY TO DISCUSS ORGANIZATIONAL DETAILS AMONG THEMSELVES OVER THE TELEPHONE IN THE SECOND HALF OF DECEMBER. ON THE THIRD DAY OF THESE DISCUSSIONS, A MIN CULT REP CALLED TO SAY THAT A DECISION WOULD BE TAKEN BEFORE THE NEW YEAR. THE REP CALLED AGAIN ON DECEMBER 30 OR 31 TO SAY THAT KHALTURIN (CHIEF OF MIN CULT FINE ARTS DIVISION) HAD GONE ABROAD AND A DECISION WOULD BE MADE AROUND JANUARY 10 AFTER HE HAD RETURNED.

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7. THE ARTISTS HAVE HEARD (REPORTEDLY FROM OFFICIAL ARTISTS) THAT MIN CULT WOULD OFFER A VERY LOW PRICE FOR THEIR WORKS. THE UNOFFICIALS FEEL THAT IF THEIR WORKS ARE TO GO TO FOREIGNERS THEN THE ARTISTS SHOULD SELL THEM DIRECTLY, GETTING BETTER PRICES. THE ARTISTS ARE NOW IN FINANCIAL STRAITS SINCE THEY HAVE HAD VERY LITTLE TO SELL.

8. COMMENT: WE ARE INCLINED TO THINK THAT MIN CULT MAY BE

SAVING SOME OF THE WORKS IN QUESTION TO ADD TO THEIR PERMANENT HOLDINGS IF ONLY TO INSURE THEMSELVES AGAINST FUTURE CHARGES THAT THEY SOLD THEIR LATTER-DAY KANDINSKIYS FOR A HANDFUL OF SILVER. BUT IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT THE MINISTRY IS ENTRANCED ENOUGH BY THE COMMERCIAL POSSIBILITIES TO CONSIDER INCLUDING SOME UNOFFICIAL WORKS IN A SUBSEQUENT OFFER TO AMERICAN COMMERCIAL OUTLETS FOLLOWING THE CONCLUSION OF THE SALES NOW ENVISAGED (REFTEL). MINISTRY DUPLICITY WOULD SEEM TO BE INDICATED BY THE MIS-INFORMATION ABOUT KHALTURIN'S WHEREABOUTS; HE HOPES TO GO TO THE U.S. IN JANUARY, BUT HAS NOT YET APPLIED FOR A VISA.

9. WHEN JOHN MOORE AND NORMAN ADISE OF MULTI COMMUNICATIONS VISITED THE SEPTEMBER UNOFFICIAL EXHIBIT THEY SUBMITTED A LIST OF EXHIBITORS TO MIN CULT AND REQUESTED THAT SOME WORKS BY THESE UNOFFICIAL ARTISTS BE INCLUDED IN THE PENDING COMMERCIAL DEAL. MIN CULT WAS QUITE NEGATIVE TOWARD THIS PROPOSAL, BUT IT MAY BE MORE FAVORABLY DISPOSED TOWARD SELLING THE WORKS OF THE FIVE ARTISTS WHO DID NOT INCUR THE WRATH OF THE ESTABLISHMENT BY PARTICIPATING IN THE VDNKH EXHIBIT. HOWEVER, IF THE FIVE ARTISTS DO STAGE THEIR UNAUTHORIZED EXHIBITION THEY, TOO, WILL EARN THE LABEL OF TROUBLEMAKERS. AND THIS WOULD POSE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS FOR ANY MIN CULT PLANS TO SELL THEIR WORKS ABROAD.

10. ONE CONSEQUENCE OF MIN CULT DITHERING COULD BE A DECISION BY THE ARTISTS TO DENOUNCE MIN CULT'S SHARP DEALINGS TO THE WESTERN PRESS. THEY REPORTEDLY MIGHT USE AMERICAN CORRESPONDENTS TO CALL FOR A BOYCOTT BY AMERICAN CUSTOMERS OF THE EXHIBITION. THIS COULD HURT AMERICAN COMMERCIAL INTERESTS WHICH ARE, TO ALL APPEARANCES, INNOCENT PARTIES. END COMMENT.
MATLOCK

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